

FIVE PILLARS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD : Connie Grawert, Queensland Region

The young child is fundamentally a different being from an adult, not only in her physical and emotional maturity, but in the way she experiences the world. Adults grasp the world through their thinking; they are able to take a step back and look at what is happening around them. The young child is totally immersed in her world; she is unable to separate herself from what she hears, sees or experiences. The better adults (parents and teachers) understand this, the more effectively we will be able to meet the child in an appropriate way.

Because the young child has a different consciousness from the adult it is important to relate to a child in a way that is different than adult to another adult. If we found our interactions on “Five Pillars” of early childhood experience this will go a long way towards meeting the child’s needs in a healthy way.

I refer to these “Five Pillars” as the 3 R’s and the 2 I’s: Rhythm, Routine and Repetition; and Imagination and Imitation.

IMAGINATION

The very young child experiences himself as “being at one” with the world. He does not separate himself from mother, father, siblings, the environment in which he lives, the trees, the animals and so on. When the child begins to say “I” this is an indication that the long process of self-realisation is beginning and the child has a dawning awareness of his separateness from others. But this is a slow and gradual process, and the young child is still very connected to the people and things in his environment.

Due to this “oneness” with the world the young child is not yet able to form concepts or to think in abstract terms. He *does* think, but he thinks in pictures or imaginatively. (You can get an idea of what this might be like if you think about your pictures or experiences in dreams. This is one reason we say in Steiner education that the young child has a “dreamy consciousness”.)

So what does this mean for us when relating to the young child? It means that we try to paint pictures for the child. Rather than explaining or giving instructions we create imaginative pictures. For example, a child might ask, “Why do I have to wear a coat?” We can give all sorts of (abstract) explanations about the cold weather and the season, keeping warm so we don’t get sick etc. We could also say, “You wear your coat just like the sheep that have warm woolly coats” or “You wear your coat just like the workman we saw yesterday.” The child is then able to relate to the picture of the woolly sheep or the workman in an imaginative way and will generally respond enthusiastically. This approach takes a bit of practice initially, but once you start doing this it becomes easier.

IMITATION

The young child learns mainly by example. She sees and hears what her parents, siblings, friends and strangers do and in a process of trying to make sense of things, she expresses her experiences in her speech, activity, play, drawings and so on. No one “instructs” a young child how to walk or speak, she learns simply by watching and listening. As she gets older she learns how to interact and behave in accordance with what she experiences in her environment. The best way to teach a young

child is to *do* what you want the child to learn. By providing the example we teach children to be courteous, respectful, cooperative and so on. This is not to say that children will always behave in this way at an early age, but as they grow older and are better able to self-regulate, these behaviours and attitudes will become good habits. It goes without saying that parents and teachers have the great challenge of being worthy role-models for the children.

RHYTHM, ROUTINE and REPETITION

Whereas Imagination and Imitation have more to do with the child's consciousness, the 3 R's have more to do with the day to day life of the child. Rudolf Steiner recognised that children go through various stages of development: In early childhood the child is a being of activity. He acts; he learns and experiences the world by means of his senses (touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing), and by doing things. It is widely accepted in education that young children's learning is "hands-on". Rudolf Steiner referred to this aspect in the child as the "Will". He also identified 2 other aspects: Feelings and Thinking. In early childhood we are mainly dealing with the development of Will.

How do we help to support the development of Will in the young child? (You can also think of "will-power", being able to see a task through to the end, acting on thoughts and feelings). The 3 R's are the key.

Rhythms of the day and night, daily and weekly activities, and seasonal rhythms allow a flow of life experiences. Regular times for sleeping and waking, meals, work and play, and specific activities allow the child to move through the day and week in a harmonious and secure way.

Routines determine the way in which things are done, for example, a parent cooks the meal while the child sets the table with tableware, flowers and a candle. The whole family sits together, a grace is spoken or sung. Each person clears their plate and cup at the end of the meal; family members take turns washing up and packing away, etc. Routines are very important at bedtime in order for the child to slowly let go of the busy day and prepare for sleep. A bedtime routine might unfold something like this: Dinner, bath time with some little song or rhyme to accompany the bath and drying off with the soft towel, brush teeth, get into bed and a parent tells/reads a story, and finally a kiss and cuddle to say "good-night". Routines help the child to feel secure and establish habits useful for managing daily tasks.

Repetition enables learning to consolidate. When we experience something for the first time we usually need to pay attention to a range of skills, for example, when tying shoelaces. When the activity is repeated again and again our skill increases until we don't even have to think about it. The young child unconsciously knows this. He will practise a new activity, such as standing or walking for example, again and again. He will ask to hear a favourite story or song again and again. This repetition allows the child to feel confident and secure, provides familiarity and gives the opportunity for improvement.

Rhythm, routine and repetition develops will-power, develops the capacity to complete tasks and develops the inner strength and confidence to undertake initiative based on thoughts and feelings, by providing the child with regular opportunities to do things in a familiar way again and again. The child begins to develop habits that can be of lifelong value.